

Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 181

As soon as Max finished her talk with Hebaron, she immediately headed for the infirmary. Medrick was laying out numerous sacks of medicinal herbs on the floor, preparing medicine for the knights who were leaving for the expedition. She rolled up her sleeves and walked over to the desk to offer him help. Medrick was filling a small bag with herbs when he looked at her, concerned.

“Madam, your complexion doesn’t look well. Please rest in your room for today. I can prepare the medicines by myself.”

“It’s... it’s because I didn’t sleep much. I’m fine.”

“Is it due to the news the messenger delivered yesterday?” He sighed as he pulled a jar of plaster from the shelves. “I’m really worried too. The monsters only seem to mysteriously increase over the years.”

“Medrick... have you... ever been on an e-expedition before?”

“I often participated in small-scale subjugation campaigns, but since I am a low-ranking wizard with no other abilities other than healing magic, I am generally a part of the rear support. When I was young, I participated in some long-term expeditions.”

He explained with a dark expression while mixing the thick ointment with a spatula. “It seems like they couldn’t find a wizard who could join the expedition. If that’s the case, then I’ll go.”

“Oh, n-no! I was asking because I’m thinking of going. I don’t mean to send you, Medrick... d-don’t worry.”

Medrick’s eyes widened in surprise. “Madam will? Did the Lord give his permission?”

Max’s expression instantly turned grim at his question. It seems that Riftan’s personality was so domineering, that even someone who had resided here for less than a month knew exactly how he would react to her plans. Max shook her head in defeat.

“I have b-been...trying to persuade him.”

“The Lady just started learning magic only last year, correct? Does the lady have any experience with expeditions?”

“N-not in expeditions...but I have encountered monsters several times...”

She did not say that she fainted both times, and swallowed her words down. Both had certain circumstances anyway. The first was due to the stress of a possible divorce, she wasn't able to sleep and eat for several days, and the second time was because she completely depleted her mana. But now, she was healthier and she had more control over her magic.

"To be honest... I've never traveled far... W-what do wizards do on expeditions?"

"High-ranking wizards capable of attacking often fight alongside knights during a battle. But a healer like me would normally evacuate to safety and heal the wounded after the fight." He explained, looking a bit embarrassed. "A weak wizard like me who has only mastered a few universal types of magic is practically useless in combat. If I am not healing the wounded, then I am helping with food preparation and caring for the horses."

"I s-see..."

"" "

If she could convince Riftan, will she have to prepare food for the men and take care of the horses? Her face clouded at the thought, she had never cooked before.

"Then... when monsters appear... Do you hide until the battle is over? What if there is no place to h-hide?"

"Knights are usually accompanied by squires on long-term expeditions. When a monster shows up it's like this... here..."

Medrick pulled out a piece of parchment on the desk and drew two lines with his quill. "The expedition is divided into two groups. The knights in the front fight the monsters, while the squires stand back to protect the food and the horses. The wizards can also stand back at this time. Because front-line knights are always on the lookout, they usually don't worry about being dragged into battle."

Somehow, Max felt subdued by Medrick's explanation. She continued to question him while preparing the essential herbs that the knights would need to take with them. He patiently and generously gave advice based on his own experience, such as how to avoid being a burden to the knights when in combat, how to avoid nasty insects while camping, and how to use the stars for navigation. Max absorbed all of his teachings and was furious with determination.

She spent a long time in the infirmary and only came back for dinner after the sun had set. She wanted to talk to Riftan again, but when she thought about how stubborn he was, she became afraid to speak. It would be better to wait for Aderon's report. She tried hard to sleep that night.

The next morning, she didn't see Riftan anywhere. When she asked Rudis, he apparently had slept in the knights' quarters. Max couldn't tell if he was actively avoiding her or if he was busy preparing for the expedition.

She spent the day at Ruth's tower, reading about monsters, maps, and familiarizing herself with the topography of the roads they would use on the trip. When she returned to her room, she asked Rudis to prepare some sturdy boots and leather pants often worn by apprentice knights.

The pants felt strange and didn't fit very well, but they were surprisingly comfortable to move around. Plus, unlike dresses, she didn't have to worry about tripping over her hem or letting the fabric drag across the floor or pay attention not to crease it when she sat down. Max quickly changed into her normal clothes and hid her pants and boots in a box, to avoid that Riftan could see them.

The next day, as soon as she opened her eyes, she quickly threw down a simple tunic and pants worn by the servants and ran to the training ground. The tension around the spacious field was higher than normal as they approached the departure date.

Max looked at the gentleman who was supervising the training. Realizing that it was a knight with whom she was not very familiar, she quickly turned towards the knight's quarters. Looking through the conference room window, she saw several knights gathered around the long table talking seriously, a map spread out in front of them. Max looked around and found only Hebaron and Gabel, not Riftan. The moment she entered, everyone instantly calmed down.

"Sir... Sir Nirta, about what I asked you the other day... How is it going?...I came because I was curious."

Hebaron looked at her outfit and got up from his seat. He approached slowly. "Lady Calypse? What are you wearing?"

Max blushed and rubbed her sweaty palms against her pants. "I... I think this is more suitable... so I tried it on... b-but, I guess it doesn't suit me very well..."

"No, no, I think it looks pretty good on you."

He waved his hands and Max walked into the conference room that was filled with awkward stares and tension upon her arrival.

"Am I... interrupting an important meeting? Should I come back later?"

"No, come in and have a seat. I was just talking about the lady's proposal with everyone."

Max looked around the room, the knights' faces filling with discomfort as Hebaron extended the invitation to join them. A gentleman immediately got up and brought her a chair. Max sat down, dwarfed by the huge knights, and looked around anxiously. The large map detailing the western continent was spread out across the large table. It was covered in intricate lines, like a cobweb, and several wooden models were strategically placed around it. It seemed the knights were discussing the route of travel.

"Where's Ri-Riftan? I heard... he slept here last night..."

"You just missed him. The commander returned to the great hall to send a message. He will be back soon."

Hebaron scratched the back of his neck and frowned. "I brought up the subject of the Lady joining us on the expedition as soon as I got here."

"It seems we failed to get one of Count Robern's wizards."

Gabel, who sat opposite her, nodded. "Unfortunately. Most of them have wives and children and cannot leave."

"I s-see..." Max tried to control the tremor in her voice. "Then... I'll be y-your wizard in this e-expedition."

"But milady, will you really be fine with it? You've lived your entire life at Croix Castle."

A dark-skinned knight sitting in the corner looked at her, his expressions filled with doubt. "We all know you are a decent healer. However, there are many monsters along the way and villages are sparse, we will have to camp most of the time. Can the Lady endure such hardships?"

"Those hardships have already been e-explained to me by Sir Nirta. I have also c-camped once on the way to Anatol... even if it's difficult... I am determined."

"It's much more dangerous and difficult than you think. Thinking too lightly about it..."

"Her majesty the Princess can do it, so there's no reason why the lady can't." A young knight who was sitting with his arms crossed to his left stood up. He was a gentleman who frequented the infirmary for treatment. "And we are all over the place, so what are you worried about? If you are so worried, then we will assign some squires as guards. Whatever the case, I am willing to volunteer."

Max smiled at him gratefully for coming to her aid. "As everyone says... the journey will be difficult... that's why I should go. The villages along the way are sparse... and there are many m-monsters... to travel without a wizard on such a dangerous month-long journey... it would be too dangerous."

The knights exchanged glances, as if communicating just by looking at each other. Max smiled when she realized that almost everyone was on board, when a cold, dark voice echoed behind her. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Max turned to look at the entrance with a stern expression. Riftan stood by the door, his expression filled with murderous rage. He prowled to the head of the table and bared his teeth menacingly.

"Does anyone care to explain why my wife is here?"

"I'm the one who asked the knights. If you can't get an assistant... then I-I..."

"You shut your mouth."

Max immediately clamped her mouth shut at his icy gaze. Hebaron stepped forward, as if shielding her from his reverberating rage.

"Your wife came here for your sake. You shouldn't look at her with such threatening eyes."

"I have already made myself clear on this matter, I said no. But do you think it's proper that she disobeyed me and went to conspire with my men behind my back?"

Hebaron frowned. "Why are you accusing her so harshly? Because the Commander is as stubborn as a mule, the Lady had no choice but to turn to us! Don't act like we plotted something that utterly doesn't make sense!"

"Whatever the reason, it is unacceptable for my wife to plot behind my back!"

The two men glared at each other with murderous intent, neither willing to back down. Feeling struck by the violent atmosphere, Max was on the brink of collapse if not for Gabel, who threw himself between the two angry wild dogs.

"Please, calm down! I understand your concerns regarding the Lady. Isn't that why we've all been quiet until now? But as you know we need a wizard and she is an excellent healer. Please consider it."

Riftan gnashed his teeth. "Are you in your right mind?! My wife is the daughter of a Duke, who grew up spoiled and pampered in a castle all her life. She can't handle the roughness of an expedition!"

Max sprung up from her seat, her expression indignant. "I c-can do it too! Please give me another chance. I am a wizard... you should not walk away just like this!"

Note – LF: HEBARON FOR THE WIN! Anyone notice how Max is stuttering super less now? I'm proud of our baby Maxi ?

Nymeria: Don't mind me, I'm super pissed off. Ughh, I wanna punch someone

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Riftan narrowed his eyes, noticing her outfit as his eyes trailed her from head to toes. Startled by his gaze, Max quickly grabbed her loose clothing and lowered her eyes uneasily. Riftan's fierce expression became more and more distorted with irritation and fury.

"What the hell are you wearing? D**n it! You've got this all planned out!" He rubbed his head roughly as if trying to ease a terrible headache. "Why the hell are you so stubborn? I've made it clear that you shouldn't interfere!"

"Riftan is the one who's s-stubborn! You keep saying no with no clear reason...give it a chance please. If I-I will suffer... a little to get everyone arrive safely... isn't it worth the risk?"

"The Lady is right." Hebaron intervened again in a slightly calmer tone.

"We don't know what dangers to expect on this expedition and we can't waste any more time looking for a wizard. The commander may agree to take the risk himself, but you cannot risk the lives of your subordinates. It's a dilemma."

"Are you saying it's fine for my wife to take that risk?"

"We can keep her safe!"

"B*llshit! Not even one of you...!"

Riftan, screaming blind with anger, suddenly fell silent. His face was fiercely contorted with anguish. He couldn't risk the lives of his men simply for the sake of his own matter. The gentlemen in the room noted this dilemma and began to chirp to ease him.

“We are not asking you to expose the lady to the battlefield. Once we get to Livadon, we can find a high priest from a temple in the capital to take her place. We can leave her in the temple for a while and move to the Louiebell by ourselves.”

“Right. Once we get to the port across the border, we will be traveling by boat, which will be significantly safer.”

“The matter is the travel of getting to the port! The route to Livadon is dotted with countless monster habitats scattered throughout the mountains and forests. If we take a noble woman who cannot even defend herself, she will only drag us down.” Riftan responded fiercely.

“That’s not true! I can also cast d-defensive magic...!”

“What and how much can you do with the little magic that you have learned in just a few months?!”

“If you can’t believe her, then let her prove it.”

They all turned their attention to the dark-skinned knight who was still standing against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. He shrugged like it was no big deal and continued.

“What I mean is, let’s test the Lady’s defenses. If she’s strong enough to deflect our attacks, then she’d be fine against the attacks of most monsters.”

””” ”

“It’s a great idea.” Gabel quickly supported.

“I agree with Eden. If the lady’s defenses are not up to scratch, then we will drop this. The lady should give up efforts as well.”

Max’s shoulders sank. She claimed it so confidently but in truth, she wasn’t sure her barriers were strong enough to withstand an attack from a Remdragon knight. She internally squirmed as the knights reached a unanimous decision.

“However, if the lady is successful, then the commander shall hold no further objections. It would be foolish to leave a wizard who knows how to heal and have basic defensive skills, forming an expedition composed of only knights to head for Livadon. Please do not impose such risks on your subordinates.”

Gabel looked at Riftan with unwavering resolve. Riftan alternately glared at Max and the knights with a sharp gaze, finding no more justification to object and twisted his lips. He remained silent for what seemed like an eternity, before finally forcing himself to speak again.

“...Fine, we’ll test your skills. Come outside.”

He turned around and walked out the door. Hebaron patted Max’s tense, frozen shoulders. “If the Lady succeeds, the commander will no longer be able to object. Please flatten his nose1.”

She had to be successful. But what if she made a huge deal out of this only to fail in vain like the last time?Max swallowed the dry lump stuck in her throat.

No, my barriers... don’t break that easily.

The other day, Medrick swung a pickaxe he used to plow as a test, and it deflected without a hitch. However, a skinny old man’s pickaxe and a trained knight’s strike are miles different.

She followed the knights into the field and peaked at their physique. They all had strong, bulging forearms and muscular legs like a stallion’s. Riftan led them to an empty space behind the training ground and turned to her after finding a decent area.

“Now, cast your shield.”

The knights rushed forward when they saw Riftan grasping the handle of his sword that was secured to his hip.

“Wait, wait a second! No way! Rumor has it that only a few wizards in the world are capable of blocking the commander’s attack!”

“Wow! That’s really too much! Even Ruth can’t deflect the commander’s attack!”

“...don’t even try to deviate. Of course, I’m going to hold back and control my attack.”

All the knights, even Max, looked at him in disbelief and doubt was clearly evident in each and every one of their eyes. Everyone knew, unless you were an idiot, Riftan had every intention of breaking her defenses, no matter how strong she did it now.

Hebaron booed loudly. “That is unacceptable. If we don’t test it with the attack of a knight other than the commander, I won’t accept the results!”

“I object to that! It’s obvious that any of you will try and cut the corners of your attack.”

“So, what if we go easy on our attack? How many wizards in this world can block a full-out attack from a Remdragon Knight? Being able to block a troll’s attack level is enough!”

“Now, now, calm down both of you.” Once again, Gabel stepped between the two angry hounds eager to bite each other’s heads. “Let’s not waste our energy on these useless

arguments. How about this; we let the lady choose a knight to test her barrier. You can measure the strength of the knight with your eyes.”

Riftan turned to Max, but she quickly avoided his expectant gaze. No way would she choose him. They would think of her like crazy if she did. Max looked at the assembled knights one by one and tried her best not to look in the direction of Riftan, whose eyes were punching a hole in her and practically yelling at her to choose him.

Hebaron was bigger and slightly taller than Riftan. As for the other knights, all of them have massive shoulders and bulging forearms. She narrowed her eyes as she examined them more closely, then turned to Gabel, whose physique was the slimmest among the knights.

“I-I... just have to name the person, right? “

“Yes, you can choose anyone as your opponent.”

“Then... I would like to choose... Sir Laxion... if you will be my opponent, please.”

The corner of Gabel’s soft smile twitched slightly. “...May I ask why the lady chose me?”

“Because you are the m-most...reliable.”

Max could feel Riftan’s icy gaze pricking her cheek, but she continued to look ignorant. Gabel looked at her with knowing eyes and then stepped forward with a deep sigh.

“Alright. I’ll test it out.”

He unsheathed his longsword tied at his waist and slipped into stance. Under an unusual pressure, Max caught the reality of the situation and scurried to lift her mana. She focused on pouring out all her concentration to maximize her mana. As she practiced, she increased the flow and speed of her mana and the ground below her trembled weakly. Soon, the land around her began to rise into the air. Max reinforced the barrier with the magical formula Ruth taught her, making the walls made with earth thicker and harder.

“It’s r-ready!”

“Then here I go!”

Max spun her mana to full speed and pushed her mana to its maximum capability. Her heart was pounding nervously and cold sweat trickled down her back when she heard Gabel kick the ground and run toward her, it was then followed by a heavy blow. The defensive wall of the barrier shook violently.

She looked at the barrier with a nervous expression plastered on her face. The attack was followed with two more thumps but the wall didn't break and didn't budge at all. Max couldn't believe her eyes; her barrier was still firm in front of her. She turned her head to Riftan, and gave a triumphant expression.

Contrary to her expression, he just stood there, tall and commanding, and looked at her with a complex expression that she couldn't define in words. Max smiled nervously at the darkness that gripped his features. Despite the stifling atmosphere surrounding Riftan, Hebaron approached him and laughed.

"Is that enough to convince the Commander?"

Riftan simply turned. "...do what you want."

Then, he walked away in anger. Hebaron simply shrugged at Riftan's bitter attitude. "Don't let it get to you. He's a reasonable person after all, he will come around soon."

Hopefully Hebaron was right, Max prayed as she watched Riftan retreat back with desperate eyes. Her heart felt belatedly heavy from disobeying her husband so blatantly, but she quickly pulled away from those faint-hearted thoughts. He gave his permission. She could take any amount of coldness and anger from him, as long as she could go with him.

1 – It means Riftan's holding up his nose too high. Basically, Hebaron's saying Max should crush Riftan's pride lol.

They embarked on preparing to leave for the expedition. Max also quickly ran back to her room to pack only what was necessary. Rudis was helping her pack while acting like a mother full of worries, she even had to fight with her, who tried to stuff fifteen outfits into her leather bag. And Rudis was not alone. Rodrigo and all the other servants brought her all kinds of things, asking her if she would like this or that. Even the seamstress who made all of her dresses came with a hat and veil, saying it was to protect her face from sunburn, but Max only picked up a few essentials. She managed to fill her bag with a pair of sturdy pants, three changes of underwear, a pair of socks, and two robes tunics that apprentices usually wore.

Max also brought a bag of medicinal herbs, some of Ruth's medical tools, and three manastones. Even though she knew it wasn't a pleasure road trip, she couldn't leave behind a small ivory hair brush and half a bar of soap wrapped in a pouch, hanging them on her belt. She wanted to bring books on herbal medicine or magic, but it would burden her to bring such expensive items, so she only packed a few parchment with Ruth's notes.

"Should the lady leave for such a dangerous journey?"

Rudis, who was working to fix the straps on her bag, spoke with a tremor in her voice. Max was delighted by her concern; her usual calm and firm maid, who never showed a hint of her own personal emotions, finally expressed herself for the first time.

“D-Don’t worry. I’m going with the most powerful knights in the West. Nothing bad will happen.”

Rudis hesitated then grabbed her hand. “Please... take good care of yourself.”

Max looked deeply into her dark brown eyes and nodded vigorously. Rudis smiled sadly. She took her hand firmly again, then stepped back. Max walked over to the mournfully meowing cats, hugged and kissed them before finally leaving the room.

Note – LF: AAAAAH MAXI IM SO PROUD OF YOU <3

Nymeria: Again, don’t mind me, just wiping my proud tears in a corner. Also, I love to see Hebaron getting all the love he deserves from you guys. He truly is the best character! T^T

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The maid waiting by the door took the bag from her hand, volunteering to carry it. Max sat on the saddle strapped to Rem after the train of servants escorted her outside with a tearful farewell. All the knights were lined up in the training grounds, ready to depart. It didn’t seem like it only took two days of preparation as they appeared well-prepared for the expedition.

“Have all your necessities been packed?”

As she approached the ranks of the knights, Gabel, who was inspecting the battle lines, spoke to her. Max nodded. He examined the size of the bag she had tied to Rem’s chair, then gestured for something behind her.

“Hey, Lady Calypse is here.”

At his urge, two boys emerged from the squires standing behind the ranks. Max’s eyes widened when she saw Yulysion and Garrow running towards her, dragging a giant stallion.

“We were told that the Lady was coming too. We volunteered to be your escorts throughout the journey.” Yulysion explained after running in a fuss.

“But... Yulysion and Garrow are still apprentices. Is it a-alright for them to participate in this expedition?”

“Squires are originally selected from their apprenticeships ahead of their knighting ceremony. Don’t worry, we’ve gained a lot of experience over the past months.”

Garrow proudly pumped his chest confidently and Yulysion nodded vigorously at his side. “I will never put milady’s life at risk, just like the last time. We’ll keep you safe no matter what happens, you have nothing to worry about!”

Max smiled at the two boys who had grown even more dignified during the times they were apart. “T-thank you. I’ll put my faith in you.”

“Rovar and Livakion are the best among the squires. Please have the two of them by your side wherever you go. Also, you must never leave the ranks at will. If there is any problem, please inform me or another knight.”

Gabel instructed her with a solemn face and Max nodded firmly. “I’ll keep that in mind. By the way... where is Ri-Riftan?”

“The Commander is over there.”

Max looked at where Gabel was pointing and saw Rodrigo, two older knights with gray hair, and her husband. They were discussing it with their other younger knights.

“The commander is delegating the supervisory of the castle. The maintenance of the great hall will be the responsibility of Rodrigo, while Sir Obaron and Sir Sebrick will oversee the training and military facilities.”

Riftan handed a ring of keys to Rodrigo and the older knights, then walked towards the front of the line. Max intently followed him with her eyes as he sat on top of Talon. Riftan’s gaze suddenly flew to her. Max tensed, fearing that he would suddenly change his mind and order her to leave this expedition, but Riftan simply led Talon towards the gates without saying a word.

“Let’s go!”

As his loud commanding voice resounded, the guards stationed on top of the walls blew powerfully into their horns, signalling for the knights to maintain their line and march across the castle moat in an organized manner. Max grasped the reins and drove Rem along the line. As Calyspe Castle drew further and further away from her, a sense of fear and strange excitement swelled within her. She wondered about what awaited them in the near future. Garrow, who was riding his horse beside her, seemed to have noticed her anxiety and opened his mouth, speaking calmly.

“There is nothing to worry about. We spent the entire spring scouring the mountains around Anatol wiping off monsters, there won’t be any drawing of arms in the upcoming time.”

Max felt her cheeks heat up with embarrassment seeing how a much younger boy acted more assertive than her. Not only Garrow, but all the other young knights all around his age wore the same calm expression.

As they crossed the town square of Anatol on their horses, people flocked to the side of the road and watched them march into battle in amazement. Max felt like an innocent puppy lost in a pack of wolves.

“Ma’am, please move to the center of the ranks once we pass through the gates.”

Gabel yelled over his shoulders and Max obediently followed his instructions. She directed Rem to the center of the line as soon as they were out of the guarded territories. Riftan glanced at her from the front of the lines, then began to drive his horse at a faster speed. The knights followed his lead, speeding straight through the valleys.

Max drove Rem whilst trying her best to match their pace, careful not to be run over by the other horses. Riding through the uneven dirt road was more difficult than she imagined. If she hadn’t practiced in her spare time, she wouldn’t have been able to keep up.

As she wondered how many hours more they had to ride like that while out of breath and sweating, Yulysion beamed at her encouragingly.

“We will be crossing through two mountains today. Once we leave Anatol, the road will be easier to travel, so please hang in there.”

Max nodded, wondering how the young man could ride at this speed and not bite his tongue in the process. Her thighs were already numb and her hips were tingling, but she couldn’t mutter a word of complaint after insisting so stubbornly that she had to go with them. Max struggled as she rode to keep up with the knights.

Fortunately, as the road got steeper, they were forced to decrease the speed of movement. She managed to regain her composure and inspected her surroundings. Lush green trees flanked them on either side of the narrow path of the mountain valleys. Sharp, jagged rocks carved out by nature tilted at the foot of the mountain, and she could hear the faint rush of water from a nearby stream. Since they had been traveling for a while, they finally decided to take a break there.

Max had a hard time dismounting from her horse as her legs jittered, then led Rem toward the water. The knights ate bread and dried beef while the horses drank water thirstily, like they would be emptying the stream. She also drank water from her canteen, moistening her dried lips, and ate a piece of dried meat that was as tough as a piece of wood. They rested for about twenty minutes before climbing back on top of their horses, immediately going back to the road.

In less than half a day, Max was completely defeated. Her saddle-mounted b**t was like it was on fire. And her lungs felt like they were being stabbed with a blade. Her braided hair kept loosening up and stuck to her face, which also annoyed her. Compared to her, the knights around her looked more comfortable despite their heavy iron armors.

Max clenched her thighs against the saddle to correct her collapsing posture. The infernal march only ended when they reached the end of the narrow and remote path, finding a somewhat gentle place to set camp.

“We will camp here today.” As Riftan’s voice resounded heavily, Garrow climbed off his horse and muttered quietly.

“Even after a full day’s travel, we’re still in Anatol territory...”

Max was so relieved that she could finally rest from traveling on horseback that she didn’t mind spending a night in the mountains. She almost rolled off the saddle as she dismounted. If it weren’t for Yulysion who was quick to assist her, she would have found her face against the damp ground.

“You must be tired. Please sit here and rest. I’ll pitch the tent up right away.” Yulysion grabbed her by the shoulders and gently held her to sit on a flat rock. She barely managed to mutter a thank you at her level of exhaustion.

The two boys quickly removed the saddles off their horses and unpacked, without showing any signs of exhaustion. The other knights were also busy making a pit for bonfires, lighting them, and providing food and water to the horses. Max knew she had to help but she really couldn’t lift a hand at the moment. She pressed her reddened palms against the cold rock’s surface, cooling them from the strain of gripping the reins too long.

“I’ve set up a bed. Milady, it’s pretty shabby, but you may come in and rest...”

“I’ll take care of her.” Max shuddered at the low voice that interrupted. She looked up to see Riftan looking at her, still with the same expressionless face. “Go and tend to your horses.”

At his command, Garrow and Yulysion immediately ran towards the steeds.

She was worried that he would scold her for being in such a disorderly state and unable to contribute, but Riftan merely helped her up and guided her towards the tent pitched under a tree without any reprimand.

“I’ll bring you a meal when it’s ready, so lie down in the meantime.”

“I’m f-fine. I too should help...”

Max immediately pressed her lips shut when Riftan shot her a terrifying look. He lowered the tent’s awning and walked away. Truthfully, she had no energy to even lift a finger, so she just slid helplessly on top of the thick blankets, worrying about what awaited her the following day. She knew her b**t and thighs would be bruised black and blue in the morning, so she wondered how she was going to survive throughout the expedition. She quickly shook her head and dismissed those defeatist thoughts.

No. Just one more day and then we’ll be out of the Anatol mountains.

According to the map, there would be plenty of flat plains on their way to Livadon once they get past Anatol. Also, her body will slowly adjust to riding, especially when the trails would become less cumbersome. She shouldn’t give up so easily. While trying to motivate herself, Riftan returned to the tent.

“It would be better for you to get a massage before having a meal. Take off your pants.”

He bent over to enter the tent and sat on a corner, pulling a small bottle of oil from a bag. Max looked at him, not certain of what she had just heard.

“Just now... what did you say...?”

“Take off your boots and pants. You won’t be able to ride a horse again tomorrow unless this medicine is applied.”

Riftan answered nonchalantly and took off his gauntlet, gaiters, and vambraces like they were cumbersome, setting them down on the corner. In the meanwhile, Max continued to stare at him blankly. He frowned when he saw her idle and placed his hands on her boots to remove it. She protested and crouched to the farthest corner of the tent in panic.

“I... I’m f-fine! There’s no need!”

“You look like you’re about to pass out any second, what do you mean you’re fine?”

Riftan approached and caught Max, who was trying with all her might to escape, placing her back in place. Her throbbing muscles screamed as he grasped her thigh. When she could no longer hold it back and whimpered in pain, Riftan frowned and began undoing her boot laces which were very tight around her calves, making Max’s face dyed bright red.

“I-I got this. I’ll... I’ll do it myself! G-give me the oil, I can do it... g-go outside for a moment.”

“You don’t even have the strength to lift a finger.”

“That’s n-not true. I c-can d-do it myself so...”

“At least listen to your husband, even if it sounds ridiculous.”

She stopped protesting, realizing that his patience was reaching its edge again. Riftan took off her boots and threw them off to a corner, then placed his hands on the strings of her trousers. Max glanced at the entrance of the tent and felt like crying.

“W-what if someone walks in...”

“I told them not to come near the tent so don’t worry.”

He exhaled bluntly and mercilessly pulled off her sweaty pants. The cool air that touched her bare skin made her face flush red as a beet.

Note – LF: I LITERALLY HAD TO PAUSE TRANSLATING WHEN HE SAID TO TAKE THE PANTS OFF. Mygod, Riftan. Keep it in your pants, please. A little modesty? At this rate, your wife won’t be able to ride a horse the next day after all

Nymeria: I have a good feeling about this oil treatment tho! I think he’s gonna keep it in his pants this time lmaoo he seems still very angry and worried about her being in the expedition

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 184

Riftan made her lie face down against the blankets and drew a clean cloth and a canteen of water from his bag with a grim expression. Max looked down in embarrassment as he drenched the cloth and began to wipe the sweat off her legs. The cold towel gently cooled her burning skin. He meticulously cleaned her thighs, calves, and even her feet. Then, he picked up the small bottle of oil and pulled the cork out with his teeth. As the slippery liquid slid down her skin, Max's toes curled. Riftan pressed the center of her feet's soles with his thumb then slowly moved his hands up to massage her taut calves. Max groaned in pain.

"I-it hurts..."

"If I don't press your muscles, you won't be able to move when morning comes."

He relentlessly loosened her tight muscles. All Max could do was stifle her groan as she buried her face in the thick blanket. The pain was so immense that she couldn't even afford to be ashamed of her current state.

Riftan massaged her calves sufficiently regardless of her pain and applied peppermint-scented oil on her thighs. Max tried to pull away when his rough palms swept down the scorching skin near her private area.

"I... I'm really fine now. Riftan, you must be exhausted too..." Before she could finish, he sighed deeply and pulled her underwear down to her knees. "Ri-Riftan!!"

"Stay still. We have to apply this medicine or else it will be difficult for you to ride on horseback tomorrow."

"I'll a-apply it! I can do it so...!"

"What are you so ashamed of?" He huffed and shifted his weight lightly on her thighs to prevent her from wriggling. "Stop exhausting yourself and lie down still. I'm not going to do anything strange."

Riftan was determined to finish his task. He poured a generous amount of oil onto his palms and began massaging her bare bottom in a circular motion. Max's ears burned as she clutched the covers tightly. It was so embarrassing to be touched in a clear state of mind, especially right after yelling to everyone that she would become their healer during the expedition. Yet there she was now, the one receiving treatment. It was pathetic.

Still Riftan, oblivious to her inner dilemma, silently applied the peppermint oil to her bruised flesh, and placed her underwear back on when her tight muscles were loosened enough.

“...I’m going to check if the meal is ready. I’ll bring it to you, so lie down and rest.” He murmured in a strained voice as he rubbed the back of his neck. His face was a little red, probably due to being crammed into the little tent. Max simply nodded and pulled up her trousers.

He let out a heavy breath and walked out of the tent with a slight limp from bending his knees too long, while she dropped onto the covers feeling like a pile of soggy noodles, completely exhausted. Max felt shame and pain colliding during Riftan’s massage, but the muscle pain had significantly subsided. She rubbed the parts of her body that he had touched, then crossed her arms and closed her eyes for a moment. Riftan did not return until the orange sunset turned into a blue night.

“I’ve brought smoked ham from the campfire. Here’s some bread to go with it.”

He placed the wooden tray next to her: there was a thick slice of sizzling oil-glazed ham, three fist-sized loaves of bread, a block of cheese, and a canteen of wine. Riftan pulled out a dagger and began cutting the food into smaller pieces for Max, who quickly scooped up the food and popped it into her mouth. The food was definitely much humbler compared to the food in the castle, but she was so hungry that it tasted more delicious than anything else.

“Should I bring you more?”

Riftan asked bluntly upon seeing her shove food down hungrily. Max shook her head, but she almost emptied the tray. Her body felt like a thousand pounds as her belly began to swell and she felt drowsy. Max immediately fell asleep in the blink of an eye, completely forgetting the fact that they were camping in the middle of Anatol mountains that were full of monsters.

””” ”

The next day, the knights began packing their belongings in preparation for their departure even before the sun had risen. Max also got ready in a hurry and climbed into her saddle. There was no time to wash her face, let alone brush her hair. Fortunately, her b**t didn’t hurt as much as she feared it would, courtesy to Riftan’s massage. However, keeping up with the knights was still too overwhelming.

Yulysion helped her navigate the dark mountain path and the lurking knights were constantly on high alert, moving only faster, not slowing down even for a moment. When they reached the foot of the mountain, they slowed down and Max could hardly ask.

“Why do they look so t-tense... I... haven’t seen any monsters at all.”

Garrow, who was traveling beside her, shook his head. "The monsters that inhabit Anatol possess a certain level of intelligence. When large armies pass by, they are intelligent enough to stay hidden in order to survive. They tend to watch from a distance. Last night, I heard from some of the knights that a few forest goblins tried to steal our food supply".

"L-last night?"

Yulysion quickly intervened when he saw her face turn a deep blue hue. "Don't worry. The knights on duty immediately noticed and took care of them."

"Was anyone h-hurt?"

"Of course not! Forest goblins can't even hope to scratch a Remdragon knight!"

Yulysion lifted his chin indignantly, as if her words were insulting. Still, Max worried and inspected the knights in the front lines. Everyone calmly rode their horses without a sign of exhaustion. She looked ahead and tried to find Riftan, buried among the big bulky knights, but she quickly gave up and concentrated on driving her horse across the bumpy mountain road.

They finally made it out of the Anatol Mountain ranges after the sun rose high in the sky. They took a short break near a stream that flowed through the meadow. The attending gentlemen tended to the horses, while others began to distribute the food for a late breakfast.

Max quickly washed her face as Rem took a drink by the stream. She wet her neck and pulled out her comb to tame her wild hair. She almost gave up on detangling her hair, but once she was done, she put it in a braid and walked back to the field.

Yulysion handed her an apple and a piece of bread.

"You must be hungry? Please eat this for now. We will have a more decent meal prepared in the evening. We cannot afford to waste time cooking food over fire during the day as we need to travel as quickly as possible."

"No... not at all... this is good enough."

She quickly accepted the food and suddenly Yulysion concentrated on her outstretched palms.

"Your hands are red! Did you hurt yourself?"

"It's because of... the reins."

She smiled like it was nothing, not realizing how seriously Yulysion was studying the sharp red burns on her palms.

“It looks painful, shouldn’t you get treatment?”

“No... this is nothing...”

“It doesn’t seem so! It’s so swollen...”

Garrow, who was feeding the horses, hurriedly ran towards them as he heard the worried voice of his friend. He thrust his head between the two of them and looked at her palms as well with a frown.

“Yulysion is right. It will only get worse and you’ll suffer the whole journey. Wouldn’t it be better to cast healing magic on it?”

“I-It’s fine. I don’t need to apply magic to my own body... It’s c-comparable to drinking your own blood when you’re thirsty. Unless it’s fatal, it’s better to let it heal naturally... and... I want to save as much mana as possible.”

“But still, you’re hurting...”

Max sighed at their fuss and sat down on the cape laid down on the grass.

“Really, I’m f-fine... Even if I cast a healing spell... my hands will turn out like this as long as I ride a horse. I can’t heal myself every time. So even if it’s difficult, it’s better to let the body adjust...” She confidently showed them the hands. “If this continues, calluses will inevitably d-develop in a few days. When my palms become rough... it won’t hurt anymore no matter how far I ride on a h-horseback.”

Yulysion had a complicated expression as he looked at her hand, thinking of a solution. Then, he hurriedly went to his bags tied around his saddle and searched through them.

“For now, please use these.”

Max looked at the leather gloves he held out in front of her. “Didn’t... you didn’t bring them for yourself, Yu-Yulysion?”

“I brought it just in case. I don’t need it so please use it without worrying about me.”

Max was hesitant but accepted the gloves. To be honest, her palms were sore. She reached into the soft, tan gloves, but on her diminutive figure, the large gloves just fell off, leaving enough room for another hand.

“Yulysion... your hands are bigger than they appear...” Max commented as she noticed how long his fingers were compared to hers. She was amazed at the sight. Despite the

fact that the young apprentice had a delicate face and a slender body, he was still a man. Yulysion blushed and scratched the part behind his head in embarrassment then he pulled a leather string out of his bag.

“I’ll secure it to your wrists. It’ll be a huge problem if it comes off while you’re riding on horseback.”

Max wordlessly raised her hands and allowed Yulysion awkwardly tie a piece of rope around her wrists.

“Isn’t it too tight?”

“...It’s perfect”. She waved her hands a few times to prove it and smiled satisfactorily “Th-Thank you. I’ll use it...well.”

“It’s no big deal.”

Max finished her food with her gloved hands. She looked at Riftan, who was reading a map and discussing routes with the other knights at a distance. After he finished issuing orders, he refolded the map and tucked it in his bag. She sat there, waiting for him to come over and talk to her; however, he only frowned slightly and turned his attention to saddling Talon for departure. Max’s eyes casted downwards at his disgruntled attitude.

After how he cared for her yesterday, she thought things between them would go back to normal. But was he still mad at her for disobeying him and clinging tightly to the expedition? Max contemplated breaking through the wall first and talking to him, but before she could finish thinking, Riftan had already mounted his horse and shouted coldly.

“Don’t sit idle. We have to start moving now. From here on we enter the territories of the half dragons. Never let your guard down, even for a second!”

The knights mounted their horses and formed up, so Max quickly jumped on Rem as well. Riftan, who was in the lead, turned to see how she was doing, then led his horse across the plain at the speed of light.

They traveled along the stream as they combed the lush green field like a wind. Max couldn’t help but smile when she felt the cool, refreshing breeze pleasantly caress her face. She knew this was not the time to ride enjoyably, but that was her first time running her horse so freely across an open plain. Her heart was so overwhelmed beyond comparison to the horrible mountain road from before.

She looked around with dazzling eyes. The sky was clear and cloudless and the deep blue stream flowing through the wild fields sparkled like crystals. Under the nourishing early summer sun, the wildflowers bloomed vibrantly, displaying their vitality. The

landscape around her was so peaceful that she couldn't believe an army of vicious monsters were currently in the move.

Note – LF: Okay, I must admit I judged Riftan too quickly lol. This is a nice chapter. Riftan displays genuine care and the young knights treat her so adorably too <3

Nymeria: Could be some mistakes in these chapters guys, I'm half asleep, sorry lmao

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 185

“It will be a good idea to be prepared to launch a defensive magic barrier any moment.”

Max was in the midst of cherishing her sense of liberation when Gabel, who was riding his horse in front of her, suddenly exclaimed at her. Max looked at him with a puzzled expression. Not a single wild animal was around, let alone monsters. She looked around carefully, terrified that some may be lurking in the tall grass watching them, but Gabel pointed skyward. Max inadvertently followed the direction he was pointing to and almost screamed in shock. Around six giant bird-like creatures with strange shapes hovered and chased over them.

“Those are harpies. It doesn't look like they're going to swoop down right away, but it's best to prepare in case of an attack.”

Max narrowed her eyes as she continued to watch them carefully. Harpies were monsters that had the body of a great eagle and the face of a human woman. She couldn't see too clearly from the distance, but she could tell that where an eagle's head should be, it was replaced by that of a pale-faced woman. A shiver ran down her spine and she clutched the reins tighter.

Yulysion approached her and convinced her in a gentle tone. “M'lady, don't worry about them and just focus ahead. We're heading down the slope soon. The road will be rocky, so you must be careful.”

She quickly returned her attention to the road and, as Yulysion said, the jagged shape of cliffs and rocks emerged, stacked on top of one another, creating a steep incline and rugged terrain. They drove along the cliffs and stopped before the steep slope. Just below the slope lies a deep valley of rocks. The knights stopped, momentarily surveying the area below the slopes. They had to descend down the slope and at the same time keep a wary eye on the harpies in case they triggered rocks to fall off the cliffs.

“Indeed, those pesky creatures should be rid of.” Hebaron screamed angrily as he grabbed the hilt of his huge Claymore strapped to his back, but Riftan raised his hand to restrain him.

“Now is not the time to worry about them.” His cold eyes remained fixed at the bottom of the cliffs. When the knights near Riftan followed his gaze, they clicked their tongues and cursed roughly.

Max couldn't see what the commotion was about from behind the troops. She poked her head out, trying to figure out what was going on, when Riftan started yelling orders.

“There are five half-dragons below. The second row... no, second and third row, prepare for battle. The rest shall wait here and stand guard from above, watch the harpies.”

The knights drew their swords all at once, while Max watched in awe as around twenty knights charged downwards like a raging wind. They rode skillfully down the steep road where rocks were piled unevenly in varying formations.

The knights who stayed behind in the cliffs split in two groups, one had to watch over the harpies while the other drew their bows to cover the knights battling against the half-dragons. Max felt like half her soul was drifting away at the sudden rigid situation.

“W-what should I do...”

“The Lady just needs to sit calmly and wait for the fight to pass. Just in case, be ready to cast a barrier.”

Gabel responded quickly and drew his sword. At that moment, the group of harpies grew into a flock of twenty, circling their heads in a dizzying manner and cried out a high-pitched scream in unison. Max covered her ears and began to form the magic formula according to Gabel's instructions. At that moment, a loud roar echoed around from behind.

Max looked downwards. At the bottom of the cliff there were massive monsters and the knights engaged in combat. Her entire body seemed to freeze solidly at the daunting sight. The monsters were approximately 20 kvet (6 m) in size, and their entire bodies were covered in sharp, rough scales seemingly chiseled roughly. Long, sharp horns

bulged from their lizard-like heads, and pointed teeth protruded from their vicious mouths.

That's a... half dragon...

"" "

It appeared much more terrifying than the illustrations she saw in books. The monsters' big yellow eyes shone, and the ground shook with each step of their thick, heavy legs. However, the knights quickly scattered amongst the rocks, not showing any signs of decline and disrupted the monsters.

The knights skillfully maneuvered through the uneven terrain as if they were connected to their horses. They systematically lured the monsters ten times their size and gathered them into a corner like they were hunting wild animals.

"Commander!"

One of the knights wrapped an iron clad chain around one of the monster's legs and dodged the heavy tail of the half-dragon that flew toward them. As the monster pried and shook violently to escape, Riftan did not miss the opportunity to thrust his sword deep into the only soft spot hidden near its neck. Dark red blood gushed out like a fountain, splattering everywhere. As Max was completely drawn in the scene, she heard Yulysion urgently yell at her in warning.

"M'lady! Stay away from the edge of the cliff! The Harpies might swoop down and push you!"

Max flinched and withdrew quickly. The harpies flew in a distance close enough that she could see their faces clearly as they flapped their wings. Some of the knights aimed their arrows at them, but Gabel quickly stopped them.

"Don't attack them yet. It will be more cumbersome if they join the fight as well."

"But they're already..."

"They are not after us."

His calm tone was instantly drowned out by the roars of the half dragons. Max waited for the battle to come to an end, anxiously fearing that Riftan would get injured. The battle cries of the knights, the thumps of the half dragon's heavy feet, and the swinging of swords continued for a long time before the battle was announced to be finally over.

"It appears to be safe now. Kindly head down first with the apprentice knights. "

Gabel instructed and Max descended the steep slope on horseback, careful to avoid any large rocks in the way. She did not have the same agility as the knights. When she finally reached the bottom of the cliff, one of the knights who was disposing of a half-dragon's carcass ran towards her and took the reins to help guide her.

"Lady Calypse, are you hurt anywhere?"

"I s-should... be the one asking that. Was there someone who got injured?"

"Sir Evan Crude was struck by the acid a half-dragon spewed from its stomach. Can you heal his injury?"

Max nodded and ran straight for him. The knight, Even Crude, was in the process of removing his breastplate and tunic with the help of other knights when she arrived. She stifled a groan when she saw his gruesome wounds. His skin, from his left shoulder, to his chest, was a dark red color, as if it had been doused with boiling oil. Hebaron clicked his tongue in disapproval upon seeing the tragic injury.

"This is only the first battle, yet like an idiot, you weren't able to avoid it."

"Don't be so hard on me. Even Lord Nirta didn't know there was one more hiding in the cave." Evan grumbled through his teeth and grunted in pain. Apparently, there were six dragons in total, not five.

Max glanced at the scattered corpses of the half-dragons drooping amongst the rocks, then bent down to meticulously examine his wounds. Most of his skin on the shoulder had been scorched, revealing a layer of red muscle. Out of habit, she reached out to rest her hand on the wound, but it was held back by Hebaron.

"Don't touch it. The Lady's hand will burn too."

"T-then.. it will have to be washed right away."

Max instructed apprentice knights to bring some water and quickly washed the acid from his body. Even though the water touching the wound must feel terribly painful, the knight clenched his jaw and endured the suffering.

"It would have been a huge trouble if the lady did not come along."

The knight even managed to smile breathlessly at her. Max looked at him through her comped eyes and cast healing magic on the knight, who still acted so relaxed even after suffering from a severe injury. As the burn healed cleanly, the tensed muscles on his shoulders visibly relaxed.

"Thank you. Looks like I'll still get to live for a while."

“If you’re feeling fine already, hurry up and rearm yourself. We’ll start moving again once all the mana stones are retrieved from the bodies of the half-dragons. There’s no knowing when those things decide to be a nuisance.”

Hebaron pointed at the harpies perched on the cliffs. The day’s light shone against the backs of the harpies; their faces appearing chillingly eerie that it seemed to turn their blood cold. Max desperately averted her eyes from the women’s pale faces that were creepily smiling and looked through the remaining knights to see if anyone else needed treatment.

Fortunately, the others were fine and did not sustain any injuries. Riftan was washing off the blood splattered on his armor in a nearby puddle while the other knights were slicing the half dragons’ chests, collecting their mana stones.

Max watched with a puzzled look. She knew that the dragon subspecies sold for a high value, but she didn’t understand why they took the time to collect monster parts when they were in a hurry to rescue the expedition team who preceded them.

“Do...we really have to take the ma-mana stones? Although it is a waste to leave it...we are in a h-hurry...”

“We’re not collecting it because it will be a waste to leave it. If the corpse was left alone as it is, the remaining mana stone will draw in the surrounding magical energy and turn it into an undead. According to the old doctrine, the corpses of monsters must be purified by fire. However, realistically, it is impossible to incinerate monsters of this size to ashes without using magic, so the mana stones shall at least be removed.”

“They will take care of the bodies.”

Riftan approached, dripping with water. Max scanned him from head to toe. Apart from being soaked from water as a result of washing off blood, he looked completely fine. He swept his wet hair back and stared at Max without saying a word for a moment, then shifted his gaze to the cliff.

“The harpies followed us waiting to scavenge the corpses of the half-dragons. Once we leave, they will be busy devouring them.”

“So, they won’t come after us anymore?”

“There is a high possibility that they will cling to us and wait for us to provide their next meal.” He glared at the creepy monsters sitting on the cliff as if they were annoying flies. “However, we’ll have to go far enough that they won’t be able to follow. I don’t intend to be bothered by those pesky hyena-like creatures.”

He spoke coldly and pulled Talon’s reins.

“Ri-Riftan... are you hurt anywhere?”

“I’m fine.”

He answered dryly and put on his gauntlets that he had taken off. Max sprinted past him, trying to force him to look at her.

“Riftan... are you s-still mad at me?”

Riftan’s lips tightened to a line. She could feel his sharp eyes sweeping her dirty face, messy hair, dusted, and wrinkle clothes she had worn two days in a row. Max blushed and folded her arms before her body defensively.

“It’s a g-good thing... that I came along. It has only been two days... since we departed... and someone was injured...”

“We will move immediately.” He cut her off harshly. “I don’t have time for idle chat, go join the ranks right away.”

“Let’s talk for at least a m-moment...”

“Didn’t you want me to treat you like a wizard, instead of my wife?” He spoke bluntly as he mounted on top of Talon. “It was you who insisted on joining the expedition, even though it was against my will. Then you must follow the commander’s orders without any objections.”

Max glared at his sharp face that was wrapped in shadows, then turned around to take Rem’s reins from a knight. Gabel, who was watching their interaction, chuckled awkwardly and reasoned out for Riftan.

“It’s because the day started with a massive battle. The commander becomes a hundred times more frightening when there are monsters around. Even the slightest bit of carelessness can lead to death, so we all have to be vigilant like wild animals.”

“I...d-don’t mind. Riftan... I mean Lord Calypse is right. That person is my commander right now, and I am his w-wizard, so I must obey his orders.”

Max proclaimed as loudly as possible, making sure Riftan heard her, but he simply looked over his shoulders once with the same indifferent face. Max was dejected and stood in her place in the ranks.

Note – Nymeria: Maxi being petty is the best thing ever, you go girl!

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 186

Garrow and Yulysion, who were occupied with the half-dragon's corpses, urgently rushed to her side. A knight who was retrieving a chain bola from the drooping legs of the monster, audibly clicked his tongue.

"Have you lost your minds? There are monsters gaping at us from above and you two, who were supposed to escort the lady, have your attention elsewhere..."

"I'm sorry. It's the first time we've seen a half dragon up close..."

Yulysion apologized through sheepish eyes, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment. Max gave them a smile to indicate that it was fine: she was surrounded by so many knights, what could happen?

The knight gave her a grim look, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. "We never know when and where danger will occur. Even a moment of carelessness can lead to death."

Max nodded stiffly. The two apprentices' faces also grew grim.

"From now on, our eyes will never leave the Lady."

Satisfied with the answer, the knight turned and withdrew another from the corpse. Max watched as the other knights wiped the blood from their weapons after retrieving all the mana stones from the hearts of the corpses. After they finished all the work, the knights washed the blood splattered on their armor with the water on the valley, then mounted their horses immediately. They departed at once, not sparing a time to even catch their breaths.

As they left the valley, Max heard the loud flapping of wings behind her. She turned around and winced as she saw the herd of harpies gathered around the corpses of the half-dragons, ready to devour their flesh. The pale faces of the women eating raw meat were stained with dark red blood, the sight was chilling, it was like a scene out of nightmares.

“There may be more half-dragons hiding nearby. Be on high alert!”

She turned her attention to the front when Riftan’s low baritone roared in warning. They continued on the uneven rocky terrain for a long time, moving along the stream running through the valley, while constantly being vigilant of their surroundings. Max’s back was drenched in cold sweat at the terrible anticipation of not knowing when and where a monster could suddenly spring from somewhere. By the time they finally stopped for a break to feed the horses, she was completely drained from the tension she felt.

“M’lady, have some salt and water. You might run out of energy if you don’t stay hydrated enough.”

Garrow handed her a leather canteen and a small cloth packet, while she sat slumping on a rock. Max took a pinch of the bitter salt from the packet and sprinkled it in her mouth, then chased it down with water. Yulysion looked at her figure with eyes full of pity.

“Please hold out a little longer. Once we pass through this valley, you will be able to rest more properly.”

Max barely managed to smile. She tried to say that she was fine, but even talking was a laborious task at that moment. They rode for another half of the day. Contrary to what she feared, there were no more half-dragons nor harpies that appeared as they escaped from the valley. Only when they reached the flat plains they stopped to set up camp for the night. Max staggered as she climbed down from her saddle and went to get some firewood to help this time. When the knights saw her, they hurriedly ran to dissuade her.

“M’lady, please keep as much energy as you can. That will be more helpful for us.”

She hesitated, then lowered the dry branches at their request. They were right, it would be better for her to recover as soon as possible, so that she would not weigh them down in the following days. She sat by the stream to wash her sweaty face and neck while the knights began to prepare their meal. She dipped her burning hands into the cold water to cool them down. Then, she drenched a towel in water and began wiping her back and armpits.

””” . ”

Truth to be told, she was dying to take a bath in the water and change into clean clothes, but she definitely couldn’t take her clothes off in a place packed with knights. Max settled for airing by fluttering her sticky clothes, trying to dry out as much sweat as possible. As she took off her boots and washed her feet in the water, wishing at least to change into her clean pair of socks, Riftan’s stoic voice spoke from above.

“The tent is ready. Come inside and rest.”

Max picked up her boots and got up. She stopped and looked between her boots and wet feet with a worried expression. She really didn't want to put her wet feet in her dirty but dry boots. Crouching down, Max tried to clear some of the water, but suddenly, her entire body was hoisted into the air. Max screamed.

"Ri-Riftan...!"

"Not Sir Calypse?"

Riftan muttered sarcastically under his breath as he held her in his arms and strode. Max sealed her lips tightly, while he urged her right into the tent.

"I'll bring you a meal as soon as it's ready, so take a breather."

Max was about to retort, but decided to prevent herself from asking him 'where in the world does a commander serve his wizard?'

When Riftan stepped out of the tent, she pulled out a clean set of underwear and tunic from her luggage and changed into them. She desperately wanted to change her pants as well, but she didn't have the energy to wash and dry her clothes. Also, she had no intention of asking the knights to do her laundry. She picked up her pants, sniffed it, frowned and wore her sweaty pants again.

For the first time in her life, she realized how privileged she was to have a tidy change of clothes and clean water for bathing whenever she wanted it. She couldn't have been more upset of her sweat-drenched pants that smelled like horses.

It can't be helped during an expedition...

She closed her eyes and laid down on the blankets. Maybe because the situation was more livable the day before, the uneven ground felt more profound. Max tossed and turned around, trying to find the most comfortable spot.

"Are you uncomfortable?"

Riftan poked his head in the tent just as she was writhing. Max shook her head hurriedly. Although he still thought of her as a prestigious noble woman who was pampered growing up, she didn't want him to think that she was being demanding.

"It's j-just... my back was itching. Is that... dinner?"

"It's soup, boiled with jerky and bread."

He crawled inside and set the tray on the floor. His tall and sturdy figure instantly made the tent feel stuffy. Max took the bowl of soup and watched out of the corner of her eye

as Riftan stretched one of his legs and took off his armor piece by piece. He arched an eyebrow, as if telling her to eat her food.

“The food is pretty humble, but there’s no helping it while we travel. Even if it’s not to your liking, at least try eating it.”

“...I have n-no complaints about the food.”

Max responded with annoyance and ate in silence. The bread was stale, and the soup tasted bland, but it was as if she was having a feast as all she had consumed since dawn was an apple and a few pieces of jerky. Max ate her portion of food in a flash. She was so hungry that she felt like she might even eat the wooden tray.

“You must have been really hungry.”

Riftan’s eyes sank as he watched her. Max blushed, wondering if she ate too hungrily.

“A-a little.”

“This kind of demanding schedule will continue until we get to the port. Can you really handle it?”

Max nodded stubbornly as Riftan continued to stare at her softly, eating his share of food. As soon as they finished eating, they laid down next to each other in the tent. Even though she felt like she could pass out from exhaustion, she strangely could not fall asleep. Max sighed and rolled over to find a comfortable position. When she accidentally brushed against his leg, Riftan, who was using his arm as a pillow retracted his entire body as if he had just been burned by fire.

Max immediately froze at the unexpected response. Was there ever a time that he had hated a touch from her? Every time they lay down together, he would always hold her in his arms, and snuggle her to sleep. But now, he was trying to get as far away from her as possible as he pretended to sleep. It was as if he could not stand to be even touched by her. Max suddenly felt terrified. Maybe Riftan wasn’t just mad at her, perhaps he was completely disappointed in her.

Max looked at him anxiously and hovered her hand over his arm. Riftan’s body visibly stiffened. He inhaled sharply, and in the blink of an eye jumped up and grabbed his scabbard.

“I’ll be outside, so go ahead and sleep.”

Then, he left her without sparing a moment for her to hold him back. Max blinked her eyes in bewilderment and pulled the covers over her head. In the distance, she could hear the mournful cries of beasts and the soft trickle of flowing water.

Riftan maintained this treatment towards her throughout the expedition. During the day, he would lead the knights, mostly in silence, and when night came, he would bring her food and set up her bed, but that was all. After that night, he never entered the tent again.

When she asked Hebaron where he slept, she found out that he was sleeping in a blanket right outside her tent or stayed up all night. Her anger skyrocketed when she heard this. No matter how angry he was at her, how could he not worry about his own health like an idiot? Max immediately confronted Riftan about it, but he only responded with agitation.

“Trust me. Sleeping outside helps me rest better.”

What else could she say when he was so firm about it? Max thought that it was rather fortunate that the expedition was so horribly difficult. If she wasn't completely drained of energy, enough to immediately pass out, then she would have been brooding all day because of Riftan's cold attitude towards her.

“Starting now, we will be crossing that mountain. The road will be difficult, so you will have to follow carefully.”

Gabel warned her as they passed through the dense forest. Max nodded and wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead. That day was particularly hot and humid, there was not even a gust of wind.

Max looked up at the blazing sun peeking through the foliage and stroked Rem, who seemed to be as exhausted as she was. She had a leisurely regret of not having brought the hat and veil that the pair of seamstresses recommended her to bring. It worried her that she would grow more freckles on her face.

“There is a small town just past here. If we are lucky, we will be able to sleep in a place with a bed tonight. So please lift your spirits up a little more.”

Yulysion encouraged her. The thought of washing her body in cool, clean water, scrubbing her hair with soap, and sleeping in a clean bed invigorated her. They had travelled tirelessly for so long that even the horses started showing signs of exhaustion and visibly slowed down. Eventually, they had to dismount from their saddles and continue on foot.

Max gasped as they climbed the steep mountain that was lined with tree roots. The sunlight that seeped through the dense leaves stung her eyes. She gazed at the steep mountain path hazily. Her chest ached as if it had been stabbed with every breath she took and the soles of her feet felt like they were set on fire.

She longed to propose resting for a while, but she desperately suppressed it down her throat. The endless infernal march continued for what seemed like an eternity, when it

miraculously stopped. However, she could not breathe a sigh of relief at the loud roar that rang out from the front.

“Put up a barrier, now!”

It was Riftan’s voice, Max looked around as all the knights drew their swords in a state of half-confusion.

“Goblins!”

Before she could process what was happening, the ground began to rumble violently, and the black-colored creatures began to rain down from over their heads. Max screamed as she took a step back. A hideous-looking dwarf creature with dark green skin and a blunt, aquiline nose sprinted towards her carrying an ax.

Note – LF: I have a feeling Riftan is feeling h***y that’s why he didn’t want to be around Maxi. Just like the chapters when he avoided her as he brought her to Anatol lol

Nymeria: That’s definitely the case, LF. At this point I’d expect Maxi to understand him a bit more, but I guess her innocence is still intact lol Also Riftan being as petty as her with that “Not Sir Calypse?” made my day lmaoo

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 187

Yulysion exclaimed as he cut off the monster’s head with a single strike from his sword.

“M’lady! Cast a barrier!”

Max was staring blankly at the decapitated body lying on the ground but was snapped out of it and started drawing out her mana. However, there was not enough time or chance to cast the barrier as the monsters rushed in from all directions. Yulysion and Garrow hurriedly pushed her back against a tree and stood in front of her in protection.

The goblins raced down the slopes with great speed and climbed up tree trunks to trigger attacks from above. The knights slashed two goblins at a time with a single blow, the monsters launching themselves in the air holding axes as weapons. Their screeches resounded sharply from all directions, like angry monkeys.

“D**n it! There’s no end to this!”

Hebron’s blaring voice pierced her ears. Max gasped in horror, leaning further against the tree trunk. Just as Hebron said, the knights slashed through goblins after goblins, but they infinitely came rushing down from the towering rocky mountain.

“Back off! With one strike of my sword I will...”

“Stop! The rock walls are collapsing!” Riftan screamed violently as he decapitated a goblin. “Our position puts us in a disadvantage! Retreat!”

“Are you kidding me?! These goblins...!”

Their exchange was cut off. Suddenly, a dull, thunderous groan came from the ground and the goblins scattered left and right in a hurry. Riftan immediately grasped the situation and shouted lightning quick orders.

“The rock walls are falling apart! Get the hell away from it now!”

The knights reacted almost immediately. Garrow and Yulysion grabbed Max’s arm and started running down the steep dirt road. Max grabbed her horse’s reins and dragged Rem down the ragged mountain path. At that moment, a heavy thunderous sound shook the mountain and the birds all flew up into the sky. Max stared wide-eyed sideways at the soil and rocks rushing down as Yulysion dragged her by the hand.

The knights hurriedly ran off the slope to escape the landslide, while the ground beneath them began to crumble at the impact of the falling rocks. Max stumbled out of balance and came rolling down the slope so as the other knights, carried away by the rushing soil with their horses.

She could hear Riftan yelling in the distance, but no one was able to respond. Every time she tried to get back up, her feet sank in as if the ground were quicksand and her body kept plunging down as if something below was holding her down by the ankle. There was no chance to pull themselves together. When they thought that they had finally set their feet on stable ground, piles of stone and soil came racing down over their heads.

She almost unconsciously used her mana at a high speed and just before the valley of rocks fell on them, a barrier emerged from the ground, shielding them from a huge broken rock boulder. Max sat against the ground, continuing to release her mana in accordance with drawing a magic formula. The barrier rose higher, protecting them

further from the rocks that had started to pile over: the rumbling sound that had echoed endlessly barely subsided as her mana began to deplete. She gasped for the breath she had been holding, so as the knights, who sighed in relief.

“I’ll be damned... that just took ten years off my life.” Gabel, who was first to recover his composure, helped her up. “Well done. It will be difficult to keep enforcing the barrier, so let’s hurry up and get to safety.”

He supported her stature with one arm, and quickly led her out of the slope. “Everyone, keep yourselves together and follow me!”

””” ”

Garrow and Yulysion swiftly gathered Rem and their horses, who were terrified and stomped in panic. Max frantically searched for Riftan in the midst of chaos but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Ri-Riftan...”

“He’s with the knights up ahead. It seems like the ground only collapsed in the rear ranks and we were the only ones separated from them.” Gabel replied as he hurried to get the knights out and counted them. “We’re about thirteen apprentices and fifteen knights.”

The knights hurriedly pulled their horses away from the barrier, which was about to collapse at any moment. After distancing themselves a bit from that place, they were able to see the scale of the landslide. Max’s face paled as she gazed at the pile of stones that had almost buried them.

“Will the ones a-ahead...be alright? They must have e-escaped it, right?”

“Kindly wait for a moment.”

Gabel pulled a whistle the length of a finger from his robes and blew on it for a considerable moment. Then a sharp sound, similar to that of a bird’s chirp, resounded from the higher mountain ground. Gabel blew the whistle a couple more times and the same high-pitched whistle echoed from above the mountains.

“Everyone ahead is safe.”

Max collapsed to her knees. Yulysion hurriedly supported her. “Are you all right? Perhaps, have you been injured?”

“N-No. My l-legs feel tired...”

Actually, her back throbbed in pain from hitting the ground, but it wasn't up to the point that she couldn't move. Max barely managed to pull herself back on her feet with her legs trembling. Rem anxiously approached her and rubbed its head against her back. She clung on to the horse's nape, barely standing on both feet even on leveled ground. After moving for a proper distance from the pile of rocks and lifting her magic from the barrier, the landslide poured down the mountain. However, the road was still blocked by a huge rock. Gabel clicked his tongue roughly as he watched.

"The road is completely blocked."

"Can't we just climb over it?"

Gabel shook his head. "There may be more goblins hiding on the other side, and there is a high chance that more rock will collapse while we climb it."

He spoke in a firm tone, then took out his whistle to blow it four times in a unique rhythm. After a few moments, the sound of a whistle was again heard from the higher part of the mountain.

"We shall look around. There must be another way leading northeast."

"Won't we be led to confusion?"

"There's a village past this mountain. I told them to regroup there so don't hesitate and just follow me." Gabel took his horse and started to move forward swiftly, his eyes wandering around carefully. "Hurry, we'll never know when the goblins will try and ambush us."

Max hunched her shoulders, then looked around at the tall trees and large rocks with frightened eyes. The possibility of monsters hiding behind the dark and watching them gave her chills.

Garrow stood protectively near her and asked Gabel. "Were they the ones who triggered the landslide?"

"Possibly, this is probably how they deal with huge monsters that pass through, and attack in groups from mountain tops. There may be more traps ahead, so keep an eye out on the terrains."

Gabel said as he jumped over a piece of rock that was blocking their path. Max scrambled up the rock sweating with the help of the knights and landed on the other side with a thud. Her wrist throbbed and every muscle in her body screamed.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm f-fine." Max answered out of habit, but she was not fine at all.

Gabel watched meticulously her condition, then looked at the dark mountain path that was covered by the shadow of the trees. His lips tightened to a line. "I don't think we can't take a rest right now. Please hang in there for a little longer until we can find a safe place."

Max held an arm around Rem for support as she desperately followed the knights. All the knights had their swords drawn as they vigilantly passed through the trees in a hurry.

"Will the goblins come for us?"

"As they saw us get carried away by the landslide, they are most likely to come after us. They will target the group with fewer numbers."

"That figures... they won't give up so easily after setting up all that trap." One of the knights muttered sourly as he ducked under a branch. "If they come after us, wouldn't it be better to just get rid of them? Unless it's a trap, those things..."

"You should not underestimate goblins. Don't you get it after what happened? They may not be high-level monsters, but among the sub-racial monsters, they excel in group coordination and strategy. If they attack in hordes that number, it will be troublesome for us. They use their brains to execute dangerous traps and attack strategically. If they make use of the terrain as an advantage just like they did, we'll be in big trouble."

Gabel explained as he led the knights through the dense trees. Max wiped the sweat dripping from her forehead with her sleeves and gazed up at the sky where birds were flapping their wings loudly.

The intense and dizzying rays of the sun from earlier had significantly dimmed. The day was still bright, but the sun set more quickly in the mountains. There was no knowing when the surroundings would grow dark. Her legs trembled, but as Gabel said, there was no time to rest given how dangerous the environment was, so Max desperately moved forward.

"When the road flattens out, we'll travel on horseback. Please hold out just a little while longer." Gabel comforted her, who was getting nervous as she kept falling behind, and led the party cautiously.

Eventually, the steep, rocky incline became noticeably flat and smoother. Gabel, who scanned the surroundings for a considerable amount of time, raised his hand to signal that it was safe to take a break for a while. Max collapsed on the ground and exhaled deeply. Yulysion came to her with an open canteen of water and handed it to her.

"This is sugar and salt. Take it with water. It will help replenish your energy."

She swallowed the round candy-like ball and chased it down with water. Half the water dripped down her chin and spilled to her clothes but she was sweating so much that there was no telling the difference anymore. She handed the bottle back to Yulyision and began to chew on the dried herb roots she pulled from a pouch tied to her waist. She had to quickly replenish her mana.

“We will travel on horseback from here on. I think the horses are very tired too, but they should be able to bear this level of incline. Can you ride horseback?”

Max nodded. She slowly calmed her erratic breathing and when her energy returned to some extent, she climbed up the saddle with the help of the apprentices. Somehow, she seemed able to ride her horse without falling down. They traveled in silence along quiet mountain paths. The knights all rode with one hand on the hilt of their swords as they kept up their vigilance. Max also glanced behind the lush bushes and trees, in fear that a monster could suddenly pop out anytime, anywhere. She felt eerie, it was as if something was peeking through the thick tree trunks. In the tense of the moment, suddenly, Gabel raised one of his hands high, signaling for them to run.

Max sped up her horse at once, along with the knights. As she leaned forward to keep from falling off, she turned to look behind her and saw goblins fiercely chasing them. The knights shot arrows at the goblins chasing them from behind.

“M'lady! Keep your eyes ahead! There are a lot of obstructions.”

Garrow warned her loudly. Max turned around and drove Rem frantically through the dense forest. A thin sound rang and buzzed in her ears. She was nervously spurring her horse to keep up with the group, when suddenly something fell from the trees. She was so out of breath that even a scream could not escape from her mouth.

Max gripped the reins tightly as Rem sporadically raised his front legs, trying to shake off the goblin that was holding on to its head. Max desperately clung to Rem's neck. The goblin screeched grotesquely, driving Rem into a frenzy. The mare then continued to gallop frantically and turned to rush down the mountain.

She tried to pull the reins to somehow calm him down, but to no avail. The goblin clung on with all its might, trying its best not to fall off. Seeing this, Max thoughtlessly created a fist-sized flame on the monster's dark face. The goblin screamed in pain and fell off the horse's head. Rem ruthlessly ran through the monster in retaliation, his graceful legs trampled ruthlessly on the goblin's large, disproportionate head.

Max squeezed her eyes shut as Rem continued to stomp on the monster, crushing it completely, before finally calming down and drooping his head as if he was exhausted. She clung to the back of her horse as tears streamed down her cheeks. She was out of her right mind; it was as if she had been swept away by a storm. When she managed to collect her thoughts, she looked around, everything was dead calm and quiet. Rem ran through the forest at such a high speed that they seemed to have gone apart from the

party in an instant. Max held her breath for a moment, and waited for the knights to find her.

Note – Nymeria: Okay, Maxi overpower literally saved the day and Rem stomping the f*** out of that goblin Imaoo good boi

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 188

However, no matter how long she waited, her surroundings remained still and dead silent. Max looked around constantly and nervously bit her lips. Rem was also growing anxious as he whined nervously and staggered backwards.

“Just how far did we come...?”

She looked through the dark mountains, hoping for the knights to come her way soon, when she heard leaves rustling over her shoulders. Max turned around at the sound. She could see something quickly hiding through the bushes and goosebumps rose all over her body. She clasped the reins, having cold sweats, and spurred her horse at once. Then, the monster hiding while watching in the bushes came out swift like an arrow. It was a goblin.

Max drove her horse as fast as it could, escaping the goblin who was chasing them with a club. Rem deftly navigated through the long, rugged protruding roots of the trees that were thick as human legs. Fortunately, the goblin who was chasing after them tripped over a tree root and rolled down the mountain, but she kept glancing over her shoulders a dozen times to check if there was anything else chasing her, as she continued to push forward.

It seemed that monsters hid behind trees and rocks, waiting for the opportunity to kill and devour them. They ran for a long time, at a speed as if they were being chased by something, when Rem sank to sit among the trees in exhaustion.

She gasped for breath and looked around before descending from the saddle with a stagger. Her heart raced like it was about to burst and her nerves were so tight it felt like they were about to break.

What do I do now...?

Max wiped the sweat from dripping on her eyelids, still looking around through the mountain thickets with her sunken eyes. The direction where they went only made everything become more and more confusing.

She was on the verge of tears as she bit her lips. What if the knights never found her? Will she have to spend the night awake all alone on a mountain full of monsters? The memory of the harpies feasting on the corpses of the half-dragons resurfaced and Max shuddered. She was overwhelmed with fear and buried her face in her knees and coughed up a sob. The blood in her whole body seemed to freeze at the thought of dying as such.

Now Max understood why Riftan was so vehemently against her leaving the castle. The world was far more terrifying and harsher than she had ever imagined.

This is not the time for this...

She struggled as she tried to calm her heightened emotions. Sitting down and crying wouldn't make anything better. She wiped away her tears with her fists and carefully examined the area around her once more. She could see a steep mountain slope to her right, while there was a gentle uphill lined with trees next to the steep rock walls.

The plan was to move northwest of the mountain. However, due to the road blockage they turned northeast with the intention of crossing the mountain. If she started heading in that direction too, maybe she would be able to encounter the knights again...

No. I have to move even if I don't get to encounter them.

Max looked up at the graying sky through the lush leaves, then stood up from her seat and took Rem's reins. If the knights failed to find her, she would have to spend the night by herself on this mountain. Even if she was on her own, she had to climb the mountain.

There was a village beyond the mountain, there she would be able to regroup with everyone once she reached that place.

Even if her sense of direction was not strong, if she could reach the top of the slope, she could get a panoramic view of the base of the mountain and easily determine where the village was located. Once she made up her mind on what to do, she became more composed.

"" ""

Max looked up at the sun, vaguely setting a direction to follow, then began to urge Rem to climb the mountain once again. She was amazed at her endurance. The soles of her feet no longer screamed in pain and although the muscles in her legs were as stiff as wood and trembled, she pushed forward relentlessly. There was no knowing when another goblin would come after her again. She nervously looked behind her for several times, but wanting to conserve her energy, she focused on the path in front of her.

She led Ream and walked through the thickly populated forest for a long time before the trees finally parted, revealing a gentle hill in front of her. Max looked around, confused, wondering if she had reached the top yet. Thick beautiful trees lined the gently curving meadow like a fence, and the sharp peaks of distant mountains rose to its left and right. It looked like she had reached the mountain ridge.

Looking up at the sky to determine her location, Max sat down for a while and allowed Rem to graze on the grass. She wanted to remove the saddle and allow Rem to rest properly, but she could barely lift a finger at the moment. Sitting with her legs stretched out, Max took a deep breath and finally got up to take the load off hanging from the saddle, hoping to lighten Rem's burden for a little.

Rem shook his head from side to side and neighed loudly, then continued to enjoy grazing in the tall grass. Max sat down next to the horse and took out the leftover potatoes and jerky from her bag. She was too tired to be hungry, but she needed to eat something for her energy to recover a little, so she pushed the food into her tight stomach, then pulled out some dried herbs and roots for her to chew.

After resting for about fifteen minutes, she felt some of her energy replenished. She gathered her remaining strength and continued to lead Rem, marching through the mountain. Every step she took, her back ached and her thighs screamed as if they were stabbed with knives, but if she could withstand her aching muscles, then she could get off the mountain before the sun set.

I need to head northwest of this mountain valley...

Max continued to look up at the pale cloudy sky over and over again to check her direction, when a faint sound of flowing water caught her ears. She turned to follow the sound's direction. After walking for a while, a small waterfall that was hidden among the trees appeared.

Max ran down the plunging rocks, ignoring the pain in her legs at the thought of washing her scorching face with cold water. She also intended to have her horse drink a lot of cold water. She led Rem to a flat spot and crouched down on a rock, washing her face with loud splashes, not caring about getting her hair and clothes wet. Rem also dipped his face in the valley water and drank in a haste. The sensation of clear water coming into contact with her eyelids, which were feeling hot like charcoal, had never felt so refreshing.

She drowned in ecstasy, as she splashed water onto her sweaty nape. She wanted to jump into the water and soak her whole body.

This is not the time to take a leisurely bath...

Max had to desperately overcome the tempting urge and forced herself to walk away. Feeling regretful, she tried to appease Rem, who rebelled against her when she tried to lead the horse away. Suddenly, a white horse with half its body submerged in water caught her eye as it stared at her.

She wondered how a horse came to be in a mountain such as that. Max hesitated and looked around to see if there was someone else nearby, but it was silent. She wondered if it was a wild horse. When she turned to look at the horse again, it was at a short distance, somewhat near her nose.

Max's shoulders flinched in surprise and the wild horse snorted and nudged her lightly in a friendly manner, seemingly meaning no harm. She raised her hand, hesitated, then stroked its bluish silver mane. The wild horse whinnied as if her touch delighted him. Max smiled at the charming reaction and reached out with both hands to caress the wild horse.

The horse was beautiful, as if it came straight out of fantasy. Its white fur was as soft and glossy as velvet and its long legs were in perfect symmetry. While she admired its indescribably elegant figure in admiration, something strange suddenly caught the corner of her eye.

She blinked in confusion, bewildered. A swaying long tail wrapped in scales was in between the hips of the submerged horse.

"Get out of there now!"

A thunderous scream came from behind her. Max lifted her head, but before she could turn to see who it was, she felt a force pulling her back. She lost her balance and flailed wildly. The wild horse bit her cloak and dragged her viciously into the water.

She did her best to pry herself off but the force pulling her was so strong that she couldn't help but sink into the water. She was in a shock as she struggled desperately, floundering her limbs but no matter how much she moved her legs, her feet could not reach the bottom.

Dear God... it is this deep?

She shook her head vigorously in terror when she felt a strong arm attempting to lift her body back to the surface and Max instinctively clung to the arm. As her cloak tore, she was able to escape from the force that was pulling her down.

As soon as she was out of the water, she gasped wildly and frantically clung to her savior. The resounding angry neigh of the wild horse was heard from behind her, then suddenly the surroundings turned dead silent.

She turned to look over her shoulders. The valley was serenely quiet as if it had all been a lie. There were no wild horses to be seen around. Unable to understand what had just happened, she looked around frantically in confusion, then she heard a harsh curse just above her head.

“What the hell were you thinking!?”

Max raised her head tiredly and met Riftan’s fierce eyes, engulfed in fury. He pulled her out of the water, grabbed her by the shoulders tightly, and shook her back and forth.

“Touching a monster like that! Are you out of your mind?! That was a kelpie! Do you have any idea what almost happened?!”

“I-I didn’t know. I thought it was ju-just a wild horse...”

The words barely managed to fall out of her lips. He continued to look at her with piercing eyes, then hugged her so tight it almost suffocated her. Max’s entire body felt like it was crushed under the weight of his hard armor, but the pain was numbed by extreme relief. She muttered his name, then wrapped her arms around his neck and broke into tears. Riftan trembled and stroked her face and neck incessantly, checking for any injuries.

“Are you alright? Are you hurt somewhere?”

“N-no.”

Riftan scoured her figure from head to toe. Max couldn’t bring herself to believe that he was in front of her right now and grabbed the hem of his robe as he wiped the tears in her eyes. Riftan pulled her into another crushing embrace and shook her.

“I told you to never leave the ranks. I warned you so many times! D**n it, do you know, do you know, how horrified I was? Do you have any idea how I felt when Gabel told me you were gone?!”

“I’m s-sorry. Re-Rem freaked out...”

Max tried to explain how she lost her way and wandered alone through the mountains, but Riftan didn’t seem to be listening. He held her in his arms for a long time and only released her when the raindrops began to drizzle over her head, then Riftan helped her up and spoke in a strained voice.

“Can you walk?”

Max nodded. To be honest, she was ready to pass out from exhaustion at that very moment, but if it was Riftan who was asking, she would walk all night if she had to. He led them out of the valley, holding Rem's reins in one hand and her hand in the other. Max struggled to keep up with him, as her boots got wet and muddier.

Note – Nymeria: So so so so so proud of Maxi!!! And oh God that kelpie got me in the first half, not gonna lie

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 189

“Where are the...other kn-knights?”

“I told them to cross the mountain and go ahead.”

Max's expression darkened. “Did you leave the knights...because of m-me?”

Riftan dragged Talon out from behind a tree as he turned to look at her. His face was stiff and his expression looked as if he was muddled.

“Hebaron will do a fine job leading the knights. I told them that we will join them as soon as I find you.”

“B-but...how did you find me?”

“I followed your tracks.”

Riftan replied in a brief conclusive manner, then pointed to her feet with his eyes. Max looked at the ground with a puzzled expression, her eyes widening as she noticed her footprints marking the dirt road. The terrain was uneven and there were roots poking out everywhere, but she could see the faint tracks here and there upon looking closely.

Seeing how surprised and astonished she was with how he was able to follow after her, Riftan pointed at the horseshoe marks next to her footprints and the crushed bushes, and broken branches that Rem had made as they passed.

“Actually, this guy helped me a lot.”

“Didn’t you think...that it could have been tracks left by a mo-monster?”

“I can at least distinguish the difference from that.” Riftan replied coldly and glared at her with a hardened face. “It’s a great relief that I have found you before the rain poured. If not, the footprints would have been washed away and finding you wouldn’t be as easy.”

Max’s body shuddered. Had Riftan been even a second too late at that moment, she would have been a meal for the fishes.

But the path was blocked, how on earth did he follow after me so fast? Don’t tell me that he has climbed over the pile of rocks? As Max looked at him in curiosity, Riftan jumped onto a board and reached out his hand towards her.

“We need to find a place to shelter before the rain pours harder. Hurry up.”

Max grabbed his outstretched hand and followed him along the mountain paths in silence. Riftan led two horses up the rugged slope and gracefully glided like a wild animal in its habitat. Even if she witnessed it with her own eyes, it was still unbelievable how he moved so quietly despite the heavy armor he was wearing. Max watched in trance as the thin sheet of rain soaked his dark hair and trickled down his thick neck, while wiping off the raindrops that seeped into her eyelids.

The light drizzle created a white mist as it bounced off his broad shoulders, and his dark gray armor glistened with the raindrops that dribbled on it. His face that exuded alertness towards their surroundings also shone smoothly. Riftan didn’t appear to have even the slightest of fatigue. Both his long, sturdy legs strode forward solidly through the muddy path without exhibiting any signs of exhaustion and when she staggered a bit, his strong forearms were quick to support her.

””” ”

Max was completely amazed at the physical powers of Riftan, his strength did not simply differ, it was like he was a different species altogether.

“Let’s rest over there for a while.”

Riftan gazed down at her drooping soldiers and turned to lead them under a gigantic tree. A yelping sound escaped from Max as she struggled to keep up with his pace. He

tied the horses under a branch with lush leaves as he grasped her staggering figure with one arm.

She was too exhausted to even protest. He walked to the base of the tree and bent down to inspect the hollow portion of the thick tree trunk that had a girth so wide that six men with their outstretched arms would not be able to surround it. After placing her inside the cave, he sat right next to her.

Max collapsed listlessly like salted cabbage and stared at a far distance through the misty rain. Her head kept leaning onto the side like it had become a heavy stone and her body trembled while she sweated profusely, seemingly confused of whether to feel cold or warm. Riftan deftly removed his breastplate and tipped it to the side, then pulled her close against his chest.

The tension and fear Max felt, completely melted away with the heat of his body that she could feel through her wet clothes. Even though they were crouching under a tree like wild animals sheltering from the rain, she felt as safe as being surrounded by a concrete fortress. She snuggled as deep as she could into his side and leaned her head against his hard, marble-like shoulders. Riftan untied his vambraces and removed his gauntlets, placed them on the ground and wrapped his forearm around her, rubbing her shoulders and her spine with his hot palms.

“We have to keep moving as soon as it stops raining. Close your eyes and rest for a bit.”

“Will a-all the other knights be alright? The g-goblins might attack again...”

“Goblins hate water, so as long as the rain continues, nothing bad will happen. Everyone should be descending the mountain by now.” Riftan tucked his hand inside her tunic and warmed her freezing body. “Don’t worry about anything and go to sleep.”

Max sighed contentedly at the intense warmth that seemed to reach the depth of her bones. Riftan continued to hold her tightly, staring quietly through the mountains. She looked up at him with half-closed eyes, staring at the drops of water dripping from his hair. Soon, the fatigue claimed her and her eyes closed slowly. The wind whistled in the distance and the sound of trees shaking against its blow could be heard.

Riftan lifted Max, who was extremely drowsy, and placed her on his lap. She naturally leaned her head against his chest. As if trying to make her a little more comfortable, he removed her wet shoes and socks and tossed them to the corner, he then massaged her swollen feet with his hot palms. Max was engulfed in exhaustion and fell asleep in an instant.

When she finally gained consciousness, the rain had subsided. She looked at the drizzle of raindrops through her drowsy eyes and then lifted her head. Riftan’s head leaned against the tree trunk and his eyes were gently closed. Suddenly, her heart sank

at the sight of him as he sat resting like a statue and breathed without a noise. Max held her hand close to his nose and felt his soft, faint breathing.

Sighing in relief, Max carefully swept his bangs that pricked his eyes. Although he never showed it outwardly, he certainly had to be extremely exhausted. It was not unreasonable to assume that he wasn't, considering how he never got a proper rest, marching endlessly during the past few days.

She felt sorry for him and caressed his taut cheek affectionately. At that moment, Riftan's eyes snapped open. Max was surprised at how clear his eyes were and retracted her hand. He stared silently at her with his eyes, which were so deeply dark that it was hard to distinguish his pupils from his irises, and lowered his head to devour her lips.

Max's head shook. His rough tongue gently explored the cave of her mouth and his warm palm slithered to her neck like a snake. It felt like she was suddenly bitten by a hound that had been laying quietly by her feet. She moaned lightly and clutched his forearm, then he breathed a heated sigh over her damp lips and clasped her breasts. Riftan pushed his thick tongue deeper, sweeping the roof of her mouth and her tongue, and greedily sucked the saliva that pooled in her mouth.

She was out of breath just like when she fell into the water. As expected, Riftan also gasped wildly. It was unbecoming of the same man who quietly climbed up a steep mountain wearing heavy armor on and breathed without a sound.

"The rain has stopped." He suddenly broke the kiss and looked into the forest. It took a while before she was able to process what he just said as her eyelids still trembled. Riftan, who looked like he was conflicted for a considerable moment, let out a sigh and removed her from his lap. "The sun will set soon if we don't hurry. Let's get moving."

He ducked out of the tree and picked up the armor pieces he had removed. Only then did Max come out of her drunken daze. Riftan was right, they couldn't afford to hang around like this. They were alone on a mountain full of monsters.

The heat that rose in her body subsided in an instant and Max hurriedly picked up her shoes. She winced as she forcibly slipped her feet into the damp boots and headed out. Riftan already had his armor on and approached her with her horse.

"Can you walk?" As if he didn't just act like he was about to devour her, he wore a composed expression.

She gazed up at him sulkily and nodded slowly. "Yes, I got e-enough rest."

"Stay close as you follow me. Just a little further downhill the path will get easier."

Riftan turned and walked silently down the wet, muddy road in the rain. Max followed closely behind him, careful not to slip. The heat was dampened by the rain, but the cool breeze did not feel pleasant as her body was soaking wet. She shivered and wrapped her arms around her body, rubbing off the chill. Riftan saw her state and scanned around carefully.

“I’ll find a place to set up a camp soon, so endure it for a little.”

Max looked anxiously around the dusky mountain with an anxious look on her face. “Are we going to... spend the night in the mo-mountain?”

“It will be dark soon while we go down.”

“B-But... isn’t it better to go to the village even if it takes longer...?”

Riftan’s face hardened sternly. “It is very dangerous to climb down a mountain in the dark. It is better to find a safe place to spend the night and wait for dawn.”

Max nodded sternly with a stiff face. She was a little worried about spending the night in the mountains by themselves, but she had no choice but to obey his words. Her head drooped sullenly. Perhaps if Riftan was by himself, he would have reached the village by now. Her heart sank as if it had become a heavy rock, thinking that she was the reason for their delay.

“Was...I-I heading in the wrong direction? Perhaps I have come to the wrong place and have moved far away from the destination...”

Jumping nimbly over large tree roots, Riftan stopped to look at her. “Were you thinking of going down the mountain alone?”

“If I went down t-this mountain... there was going to be a village so...”

Max muttered and trailed off, fearing he would get angry with her decision, as Riftan squinted at her. But instead of yelling at her, Riftan turned his attention back to the dark forest and spoke calmly.

“You found the right direction. If you went down this way, you would have reached the village.”

Her heart, which had sunk down into depression, somewhat softened at his words. They continued to walk through the mountain in silence, the darkness slowly falling upon them. Before the sun had fully set, Riftan found a small cave. He inspected it, making sure it was free of any bugs, bats, and snakes before motioning for her to come inside. Max looked around the dark, cavernous space worriedly, then settled inside and sat on her knees.

“I’m going to remove the saddles from the horses. Wait for a moment.”

Max nodded and hugged her knees. She watched as Riftan ducked to go outside and tied the horses around a tree where they could clearly see them and came back into the cave with his luggage.

“It’s a bit damp but it’s not that wet. Take off your clothes and put this on.”

He took a blanket from his leather bag and held it in front of her. Max’s eyes opened widely.

“H-here?”

“The temperature plummets at night. You will suffer from hypothermia if you continue to wear wet clothes.”

He firmly handed her the blanket and turned to remove his own clothing. Max glanced uneasily around the dark cave ceiling and the forest that now appeared bluish, then took off her clothes, unable to bear the growing chills. As soon as she removed her soaked tunic and pants that clung to her skin, she wrapped the blanket tight around her, immediately feeling more comfortable. She also took off her boots and set them aside, wrapping the blanket around her ankles.

“I’m a-all done.”

Riftan glanced at her over his shoulders, then pulled something more out of his bag. Max sat silently next to him. Riftan ripped off the sleeves of his tunic, gathered the cloth into a ball, and struck two pieces of flint over it to spark a fire.

Note – Nymeria: I think the next chapter will be... *wink wink*

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Under The Oak Tree

Chapter 190

“Should I light a fire with... magic?”

“No need to. Don't waste your mana.”

Riftan replied in a gruff tone as he struck the flint. After a few attempts, a faint stream of smoke billowed out of the torn fabric. He leaned over and blew on it carefully, igniting the embers, then took some pinecones out of his bag. He carefully stacked them to help fuel the fire. Soon, the pinecones caught fire and the flames grew to a manageable campfire.

“I'm going around to collect some firewood to use. Don't stray away and stay right here.”

Where in the world is he going in this current state? Max pondered as she sat around the small fire with the blanket, watching his back as he went into the dark forest. Riftan picked up broken branches enough to fill his arms, keeping himself at a distance where she could see him, and soon returned.

“Those are damp from the rain... will those catch fire?”

“I picked only those that weren't soaked as much. These can be used as firewood once the wet layer of the bark has been shaved off.”

Riftan sat on one side of the cave and pulled an arm-length sword from his belt. Max watched as he skillfully peeled the barks off the firewood. After peeling off the drenched layers, he piled the pale branches into the fire and gradually the flames burned bright enough to light the whole cave.

“Hand me the wet clothes.”

Max picked up the pile of clothes that had been carelessly tossed on the floor and handed it to him. Riftan wrung the water out of each piece and spread it close to the heat. Then, he placed their wet boots upside down and positioned them near the fire as well.

Max rummaged in her bag, looking for food that they could eat. Riftan looked at her knowingly and took a small cloth-wrapped bundle out of his bag.

“I was in a hurry to find you so this was all I managed to bring.”

He unwrapped it, revealing a stale bread and a dry, salted long sausage. Max looked at the loaf of crumbled stale bread and the sausage, which was so dry it looked like a stone. The bread was edible, it could be chewed thoroughly and somehow make its way down their throats, but the sausage had no chance of being digested.

She gazed down disappointedly at the long piece made of minced meat packed into a pig's thin intestinal lining. Riftan cut the sausage into small pieces, then took an empty

canteen. He took some leather ropes and skillfully wove the unused branches, making a hanging pole right over the fire. He h****d the canteen with the sausages thrown in over the fire and soon, the meat's oils began to sizzle.

"Give me the pack of herbs."

Max meekly handed over a packet of herbs from her bag and watched as he added mandrake roots, herbs, and breadcrumbs into the makeshift pot, shaking it well to mix the ingredients. She swallowed the drool that the oil's savory smell drew out of her mouth. Riftan poured some water over the deliciously stir-fried sausage, and within a matter of minutes, transformed it into a fragrant soup.

"There's no spoon to eat it with, so have it with the bread."

"" "

Riftan took the canteen from the fire and handed it over. Max carefully took the steaming hot soup and took a sip. Because of the salted sausage, there was flavor dispersed in the dish. She took the bread that Riftan had divided with a dagger, used it to pick up the sausage and ate it. It was an impoverished meal, especially compared to the food at Calypse Castle, but Max was simply grateful to have a proper meal deep in the dark mountains. She drank the hot broth enthusiastically and took a big bite of the bread, sighing contentedly at the warmth blooming in her stomach.

"Riftan... I wasn't aware that you knew how to c-c**k."

"I don't know much about cooking. It's more about using what I have and making something edible out of it. These are one of the few things I learned while I was a mercenary. "

Max looked at him curiously. "How old were you... when you joined the mercenaries?"

Riftan, who was sipping the soup, looked at her with a raised eyebrow, as if wondering why the sudden interest. Max then nervously added.

"I... I heard that you became a mercenary... at a young age... b-but I'm not sure exactly how young..."

"I was twelve when I joined."

Max was taken aback. "T...Twelve years old?"

He popped the bread into his mouth and nodded curtly. Max didn't want to probe around for more details, but she couldn't help the itch to know why a twelve-year-old would decide on joining the mercenaries. Max couldn't overcome her curiosity as she watched him, then finally uttered her question out loud.

“W-what did you do before that?”

Riftan didn't respond and simply busied himself with the fire poking it with a branch to keep it ignited. Max pried again, growing more impatient.

“A-after you joined the mercenaries... you went to Livadon, right? Before that... where did you live?”

“Somewhere in Anatol.”

Max frowned at how evasive he was. “Where in Anatol?”

“...somewhere east.”

Max wanted to ask where in the eastern region, but watching Riftan grow increasingly uncomfortable with her questions, she stopped prodding. An uncomfortable silence surrounded them from a moment. She wondered if he didn't like talking about his childhood. However, she couldn't suppress the desire to know everything about him.

“W-what about your parents... what did they do?”

“What's the point of knowing?”

Riftan replied curtly and Max immediately closed her mouth. Seeing her face redden, Riftan let out a sigh.

“The woman who gave birth to me was a servant from the south. My biological father was probably a knight.”

“B-biological father?”

“I'm an illegitimate child.” He answered vaguely and turned his face away. “I never saw my father's face. He got involved with a servant just to pass time but got her pregnant. He gave her a little dowry, married her off to someone else, then left. After that, he appears to have died in battle.” A faint sneer suddenly became evident on his lips. “He was probably not a skillful knight.”

“Your m-mother... how is she?”

“She died when I was twelve.” Max stopped speaking at the ice in his tone, but Riftan continued dryly. “After she died, I stayed with my stepfather for a while, then I ran away from home and joined the mercenaries.”

“Your stepfather... did you have not-so-good t-terms with him?”

“It wasn't really good, but it was not bad either.”

“B-But... if you left when... you were twelve... then...”

“Maxi.” Her question was sternly cut off. “We’ll get off the mountain as soon as the sun shines. Enough with the questions, if you’re done eating, get some sleep.”

Max closed her mouth, unable to ask more. Her heart ached from being so brutally closed off by him, but it was understandable: even she had things she wasn’t confident sharing.

She finished the remaining soup and bread, struggling to keep a straight face, and lay down by the fire with the blanket still wrapped around her. Riftan removed his breastplate, leaned against the wall near the entrance of the cave and stretched his long legs out.

The crackle of fire and the sound of insects echoed in the quiet darkness. Max gazed at the flickering shadows projected by flames as she laid down, then turned her head. Although she was exhausted to the point of passing out, for some strange reason, she couldn’t fall asleep.

“Riftan... aren’t you going to sleep?”

“I’ll fall asleep eventually. Don’t worry about me.”

He replied bluntly as he placed a hand on top of his sheathed sword. He was always on guard, as if a monster would appear anytime. Seeing her look worried about him staying up all night, Riftan swept back the hair that fell on her forehead.

“I’ll be protecting you so don’t worry about anything and sleep soundly.”

Max wanted to tell him that she was awake not because she was afraid, but when she looked out into the deep dark forest, she flinched a little. The wavering shadows cast by the trees and bushes seemed alive, but surprisingly, she wasn’t as scared as she would have been because Riftan was here.

Max placed her hand on his lap. He moved his legs, seemingly uncomfortable then eventually held her hand. Max then closed her eyes. She hated the thought of him standing guard all night while she was sleeping, but she didn’t have the strength to stay up either. When the sun would come up, she would be completely deranged from exhaustion and would end up being a burden to him. The priority now was to regain her strength as much as she could, so she wouldn’t get in his way, still Max struggled to sleep with her heart being sorry for him.

The next day, Max woke up to the bluish glow of dawn that began to shine through the tree leaves. As she looked around, she found Riftan wearing his full armor and he already had saddled their horses. She lifted her groggy body off the ground and shuddered from the cool morning breeze caressing her bare chest, startling her and

making her pull the blanket up again. Riftan narrowed his eyes as he watched her rise, then turned his back on her with a clenched jaw.

“If you’re awake, get dressed. We have to get off the mountain.”

Max stood with the blanket wrapped around her and picked up her tunic and pants that were left to dry on a rock. The clothes were still damp, but they were wearable. She pulled the cold tunic over her head, then her trousers and fastened the belt around her waist. Her boots were barely dry and she didn’t really want to stick her feet in them, but she had no choice. Max wore her shoes and walked over to Rem’s side with a disgruntled expression on.

“Never ever lose your focus on me and follow me closely. Do you understand?”

Riftan said sternly as he lifted her onto the saddle. Max wanted to reply, saying that she was attentive and not as scattered as he thought she was, but upon seeing the dark circles under his baggy eyes, she nodded obediently. After he jumped onto Talon, they began to descend the mountain. Max stuck as close to him as possible as she watched the path ahead, slowly lit up by the sun. She was nervous at the prospect of another goblin appearing, but only silence surrounded them.

They found a small spring in the middle of the mountain and stopped to allow the horses to drink, then continued down the trails without a break. By the time they reached the foot of the mountain, it was barely noon. Max smiled brightly as she looked over the quiet village perched on the wide valley. She sighed in pleasure, thinking that soon, she could take a real bath with soap, eat food while sitting at a table, and sleep on a soft bed under a roof.

Max rode down the hills with Riftan like the wind. The village was surrounded by a high wall made out of layers of logs. As they got closer, she could see the tightly barred entrance. Riftan approached it and knocked on the gates.

“Who is here?”

A man who appeared to be the guard poked his head through the cracks in the entrance. Riftan took his identification from his armor and showed it to the man.

“I am the Commander of the Remdragon Knights, Riftan Calypse. I am bound for Livadon under the command of the king. We were separated from our group. Didn’t the other knights arrive last night?”

The guard hastily opened the entrance. “Ro-Rosem Wigru de Calypse! It’s an honor to meet you! The other knights who arrived last night are staying at the Hanoa Inn. I’ll guide you there.”

Note – LF: I'm pulling my hair out of frustration—I want so badly for Maxi to know that Riftan was the boy who saved her T^T

Nymeria: Well I was wrong, nothing to wink wink here lol

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